

Access areas as socio-spatial infrastructure in cohousing: evidence from four European case studies

Archnet-IJAR:
International
Journal of
Architectural
Research

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Received 23 February 2026

Revised 20 May 2026

19 June 2026

Accepted 3 July 2026

Abstract

Purpose – To examine how cohousing access areas operate as socio-spatial infrastructures that support everyday encounters and community life beyond circulation.

Design/methodology/approach – Multiple-case qualitative study of four European cohousing projects using plan-based analysis, *in situ* observation and four semi-structured interviews, synthesised through thematic coding and cross-case comparison.

Findings – Everyday encounters were reported and observed as more frequent when access areas offered slack space (i.e. generous dimensions beyond minimal circulation), maintained mutual awareness without forcing interaction (clear sightlines and moderate transparency), connected directly to communal programmes and/or the street and provided legitimate reasons to linger (seating, planting, mailboxes and shared objects). In contrast, more constrained or weakly lit corridors were described as predominantly transitory, reducing opportunities for spontaneous conversation.

Research limitations/implications – With four cases and four interviews, findings are transferable design propositions rather than universal causal claims; future work should test them with larger samples and POE style measures.

Social implications – Designing access areas for staying as well as moving can support informal support networks and everyday care practices, strengthening cohesion while allowing privacy regulation.

Originality/value – The paper's primary contribution is an evidence-informed cross-case synthesis that links access-area configuration to everyday encounter patterns in cohousing, supported by triangulated data and evidence map (Table 2). It frames access areas as socio-spatial infrastructure rather than leftover circulation and translates these patterns into transferable, low-threshold design propositions.

Keywords Architectural design, Cohousing, Access areas, Collective housing, Community-building, Intermediate spaces

Paper type Research article

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Funding: This work was supported by the Diputación Foral de Gipuzkoa (Provincial Council of Gipuzkoa) (grant no. 26000). The Open Access publication fee for this article was funded by the Department of Architecture, University of the Basque Country (EHU); the Department of Housing and Urban Agenda of the Basque Government; and Project PID2023-151195OA-I00, funded by MICIU/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), European Union (EU).



Archnet-IJAR: International Journal of
Architectural Research
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 1938-7806
p-ISSN: 2631-6862
DOI 10.1108/ARCH-02-2026-0166

Introduction

Many European cities face interlinked challenges of housing affordability, demographic ageing and social isolation. These pressures intersect with everyday care needs and have prompted groups to explore alternatives to conventional housing models (Valenzuela, 2023).

Cohousing offers one architectural response by combining private dwellings with shared spaces and resident-led governance. Beyond providing a roof, it seeks to support everyday mutual support and reduce isolation through spatial and organisational arrangements.

Cohousing is now present across Northern Europe, North America and, increasingly, Southern Europe (Choi, 2004; Tummers, 2017; Brenton, 2013; Glass, 2012; Zhang, 2018; Etxezarreta *et al.*, 2018). In Spain, recent projects indicate growing interest in compact, cooperative forms of collaborative housing (Avilla-Rollo *et al.*, 2021).

While many North American and UK examples are low-density clusters, several European contexts produce denser, multi-storey buildings where access and circulation spaces become central to everyday co-presence (Beck, 2020; Wang and Hadjiri, 2017).

Resident profiles, motivations and governance models vary widely and strongly shape community life. Here, we focus on the spatial dimension while acknowledging that built form interacts with these socio-organisational conditions.

We ground the study in a definition of cohousing that combines shared facilities, agreed rules and resident participation in governance (Chiodelli and Baglione, 2013; Beck, 2020).

Why analyse access areas in cohousing? Access areas are important since they represent the first transition between the public and the most private areas. Moreover, their design challenges the traditional duality between private and public spheres, paving the way for the construction of an interconnected community among cohousing residents – in other words, the neighbourhood. For this reason, we examine whether these areas foster close relationships through regular interactions, as stated by various authors.

For example, when Torres-Antonini (2001) refers to access areas as an “information hub”, she suggests that they serve as relational spaces for exchanging information. Complementary to this idea, Williams (2005), drawing from Abu-Ghazze’s (1999) definition of an access area, describes it as a “buffer zone” – a space of security where social interactions occur in an atmosphere of trust and mutual care (Abu-Ghazze, 1999). From these perspectives, we derive that the significance of these spaces lies in their potential to enhance relationships within the neighbourhood and the broader environment. Additionally, they serve as the primary symbolic reference for those who inhabit the cohousing and can contribute to strengthening their sense of belonging.

In conventional housing developments, access areas or lobbies are usually minimised (to maximise private spaces, which ultimately generate economic profit). At the same time, these areas are often underutilised, functioning merely as passageways leading to private areas. However, access areas have the potential to play a crucial role in addressing individual needs through collective management, providing meeting places where personal connections and community living can be fostered. They can contribute to an “enhanced sense of place, increased self-awareness, compassionate caring and shared community knowledge” (Abu-Ghazze, 1999).

Bearing in mind that cohousing developments are created with the intention of fostering interconnection among residents (Jarvis, 2011), it is essential that both the design of the homes and the surrounding spaces allow people to maintain a high level of social interaction (Williams, 2005).

This interpretation can be further illuminated through the notion of “multidimensional reality”, as discussed by Chinchilla (2020) in the context of care-oriented urbanism: streets are not merely corridors to move from A to B, but places where multiple activities, meanings and temporalities coexist. By analogy, the access areas examined here are not only circulation spaces but also potential settings for micro-activities (waiting, chatting, supervising children, resting and exchanging objects) and for the everyday negotiation of privacy and sociability. This lens helps to frame access areas as socio-spatial infrastructures rather than residual space.

From these considerations, we advance an exploratory proposition: that cohousing – particularly its collective access areas – can operate as socio-spatial infrastructure that supports everyday encounters, informal care practices and community governance. To

examine this proposition, we analyse access areas in four European cohousing projects through plan-based comparison, *in situ* observation and resident interviews.

Research questions and contribution

While cohousing research has documented the importance of shared facilities and governance for everyday sociability, the design and use of access areas – the intermediate spaces residents repeatedly traverse between private dwellings and communal life – has been less often examined as a distinct analytical unit. Reviews of collaborative and cooperative housing emphasise socio-organisational dimensions and shared programmes (Czischke Ljubetic *et al.*, 2020; Agustin Guity Zapata and Stone, 2022), yet they also point to the need for more fine-grained architectural evidence on how everyday community is supported by sequences of thresholds and circulation.

- RQ1. Which spatial and design elements in access areas of cohousing projects are associated with more frequent everyday encounters and informal interaction among residents?
- RQ2. How do residents describe the role of access areas in facilitating (or hindering) community-building and collective practices in daily life?
- RQ3. What transferable design propositions can be derived from cross-case comparison of access-area configurations?

The paper contributes (1) a comparative reading of four European cohousing projects through an access-area lens that links specific spatial attributes to report and observe encounter patterns; (2) an evidence map that clarifies the evidential chain behind each cross-case proposition; and (3) a set of transferable, low-threshold design propositions that can inform both architectural practice and future post-occupancy research. Claims are presented as evidence-informed propositions rather than universal rules.

In the four cases analysed, projects were initiated by cooperatives or associations that prioritise communal spaces and participatory governance from inception (Agustin Guity Zapata and Stone, 2022). Housing co-design research further emphasises the value of addressing residents' requirements and agency within participatory design processes (Raposo *et al.*, 2026).

Although architecturally designed spaces alone do not determine the formation of strong communities, they can create conditions that support everyday co-presence, informal care and collective practices. Therefore, after analysing the four cases, we develop evidence-informed design propositions that may inform other collective housing projects, while recognising that outcomes depend on governance arrangements, resident composition and cultural expectations.

Research background

Cohousing studies have frequently focused on shared facilities and on governance arrangements that organise collective life. Yet community-building also unfolds through repeated low-stakes co-presence in intermediate spaces that connect homes to shared programmes (Williams, 2005; Ledent and Salembier, 2021; Mellen and Short, 2023). Recent cooperative/cohousing research likewise calls for more detailed architectural evidence on the everyday use of collective and semi-public spaces (Czischke Ljubetic *et al.*, 2020; Liu *et al.*, 2025). By foregrounding access areas – corridors, galleries, lobbies and entrance courtyards – this paper contributes to this agenda and complements Nordic discussions on how community life is co-produced through design and co-creation processes (Andersen and Lyhne, 2022).

Recent research on thresholds and in-between spaces argues that areas labelled as “circulation” can host layered everyday practices and support a sense of comfort and community across the public-private gradient (Santos-Garcia and Aseguinolaza, 2025). In cooperative and shared housing, intermediate zones can maintain social bonds by accommodating informal routines, micro-appropriations and acts of care (Khatibi, 2022).

Chinchilla's (2020) notion of "multidimensional reality" is useful here, as it reframes thresholds as spaces that can accommodate care, exchange and informal social life – especially when residents can regulate exposure between private and collective realms.

Environmental psychology highlights privacy regulation and graded thresholds as preconditions for sociability (Altman, 1975); recent syntheses in housing research review how privacy, territoriality and semi-public realms are negotiated across contexts and methods (de Macedo *et al.*, 2022) and identify perceived privacy as a key component of socially sustainable semi-public space (Amirjani *et al.*, 2025). Configurational approaches, including spatial syntax, relate layout to movement and co-presence potential (Hillier and Hanson, 1984); recent empirical studies combine space syntax and observation to examine how in-between spaces and permeability relate to social interaction (Zerouati and Bellal, 2020). Shared-living research also links spatial configuration and visual integration to patterns of co-presence in coliving environments (Alydreessy, 2026). Flexible housing scholarship adds that adaptability requires spatial redundancy: Schneider and Till (2005) critique "tight-fit" functionalism, and Till (2009) conceptualises "slack space" as spatial allowance beyond immediate requirements that enables unprogrammed use. More recent debates on housing adaptability continue to treat slack space provision as a practical design strategy for accommodating everyday uncertainty and change (Rabeneck, 2021; Pelsmakers and Warwick, 2022). We mobilise these lenses to frame access areas as socio-spatial infrastructure and to interpret generous dimensions as a resource for everyday appropriation.

Materials and methods

Methodology

Research design and timeframe. This study adopts a multiple-case qualitative design to examine how collective access areas in cohousing projects mediate between private dwellings and shared community life. Fieldwork (site visits, *in situ* observation, photographic documentation and semi-structured resident interviews) was conducted between December 2022 and June 2023, combining spatial documentation with direct observation and resident accounts to build an evidence base that integrates built form with lived experience.

Case identification and selection. Within a European geographical framework, an initial pool of 18 cohousing cases was identified and visited across five countries (Denmark, Switzerland, Austria, Germany and Spain) between December 2022 and June 2023. Spain was included as the primary reference territory for the transferability of findings. From this pool, four cases were selected for in-depth study using the following criteria.

- (1) Geographical criterion. To ensure relevance to the Spanish context while engaging with more consolidated trajectories, two Spanish cases and two non-Spanish European cases were selected (Switzerland and Austria).
- (2) Temporal criterion. Completion dates were considered to explore potential effects of implementation timing on entry-space design and use. The Swiss and Austrian examples precede the Spanish ones (completed in 2015 and 2017, respectively), while the Spanish examples were completed in 2018. Although the time difference is small, and the Spanish projects were already in the draft phase – La Borda since 2012 (López-Bahut, 2016) – when the Swiss and Austrian projects were completed.
- (3) Morphological criterion. The analysis focuses on compact urban environments characterised by medium–high density and a certain level of vitality.
- (4) Spatial/configurational criterion. Cases were selected to represent varied access-area configuration (corridor, gallery and entrance courtyard/foyer) and differing degrees of openness, adjacency and spatial allowance, enabling meaningful cross-case contrast rather than selecting only "successful" examples.

Because cohousing projects are intentionally community-oriented, the case set is purposely information-rich. This supports design learning but may privilege contexts where communal use-of-public access areas are plausible. We therefore present results as evidence-informed propositions and discuss boundary conditions (governance, resident composition and cultural norms) rather than claiming architectural determinism.

Following these criteria, the four case studies summarised in [Table 1](#) were: LiSA (Vienna, Austria), Soubeyran (Geneva, Switzerland), Las Carolinas (Madrid, Spain) and La Borda (Barcelona, Spain).

Analytical framework: six access-area criteria. To operationalise the exploratory proposition that access areas can function as a first residential environment fostering community life, six analysis criteria were defined and applied consistently across cases:

In this paper, “affordances” are understood as opportunities for action offered by the environment ([Gibson, 1979](#)).

- (1) Slack space (generous dimensions). Access areas that exceed minimum circulation requirements – providing a degree of spatial “slack” beyond tight-fit functionalism-support unprogrammed, evolving and care-related uses over time ([Schneider and Till, 2005](#); [Till, 2009](#)).
- (2) Access and pathways. Wide and diverse access points and the possibility to move through space along multiple pathways rather than a single linear route.
- (3) Adjacent spaces. Adjacency not only to private dwellings but also to communal-use spaces, enabling varied interactions and softening the public-private duality.
- (4) Enclosures (transparency and flexibility). Transparent and/or flexible boundaries that support fluid relationships between areas.
- (5) Furniture and vegetation. Seating and greenery that legitimise lingering, exchange and informal communication beyond entry/exit.
- (6) Traces of appropriation and communication infrastructures. Resident-added objects (e.g. scooters, toys, helmets, toolboxes and clothing swaps) and information surfaces (mailboxes, notice boards, posters) are treated as traces of everyday appropriation and community organisation rather than as designed features.

Data collection. Qualitative techniques were used to gather information on the six criteria. Four focused ethnographic visits were conducted – one per case – combining semi-structured interviews and direct field observation, supported by architectural documentation (plans/sections).

Interviews: four semi-structured interviews were carried out (one per project). Informants were contacted in advance, and the objective and scope of the study were explained. Interviewees had different types and levels of involvement with their cohousing projects, aiming to reflect variation in participation trajectories. In LiSA, a resident involved from the beginning (also one of the promoters) was interviewed. In Soubeyran, the interviewee was a resident who also participated in the technical team drafting the architectural project. In Las

Table 1. Case studies summary

Code	Project	Location	Year	Building size
VIE.LI	LiSA	Vienna (Austria)	2015	GF + 6 floors
GVE.ES	Soubeyran	Geneva (Switzerland)	2017	GF + 5 floors
MAD.EP	Las Carolinas	Madrid (Spain)	2018	GF + 3 floors
BCN.BO	La Borda	Barcelona (Spain)	2018	GF + 5 floors

Carolinas and La Borda, interviewees were residents who joined once the projects were already underway. Interviews explored (1) daily routines and typical routes, (2) where and how informal interaction occurs, (3) moments when residents intentionally avoid or seek contact, (4) comfort, safety and perceived appropriateness of staying in access areas and (5) the role of thresholds, objects, seating and greenery in enabling or discouraging use.

Interview documentation varied by case. Verbatim quotations are provided where audio-recorded and transcribed excerpts were available (VIE.LI; BCN.BO). For GVA.ES and MAD.EP, interviews were documented through detailed field notes and post-interview memos; insights are reported as resident accounts without quotation marks.

Direct field observation: observations were conducted in normal conditions without intervention, systematically documenting behaviours and traces of use relevant to the analytical criteria. Observation was essential for interpreting qualities that can remain invisible when analysing plans alone, such as micro-appropriations, momentary stopping and the rhythms of movement through access areas. Data were recorded through contemporaneous notetaking, sketches, annotated plans and photographic documentation. Access points, pathways, furniture, objects and other traces were recorded alongside usage patterns, timing and user profiles when observable.

Data analysis and triangulation. Interview material was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). First, the materials were read iteratively to identify recurring statements related to encounters, privacy boundaries and decisions to linger or pass through. Codes were consolidated into themes (e.g. visibility and mutual awareness, threshold comfort, controllability of exposure, shared affordances such as seating or planting and adjacency to collective destinations). Spatial attributes were extracted from drawings and field notes (e.g. corridor/gallery width, transparency, entrance spacing and proximity to communal rooms). Themes were compared across cases to identify convergent patterns and meaningful contrasts and were summarised in an evidence map (Table 2).

Triangulation was achieved by linking each interpretive claim to at least two forms of evidence whenever possible: spatial evidence (plans/sections), observed traces and behaviours on site, and residents' descriptions. This approach reduces reliance on purely visual interpretation of drawings and helps distinguish between plausible spatial affordances and experienced social effects.

Ethics. All interviewees provided informed consent. Personal identifiers are not reported, and quotations (where used) are anonymised at the case level.

Scope and limitations. Given the small number of cases and interviews, the study does not claim universal causal relationships between a single spatial variable and "community". Instead, it develops transferable design propositions grounded in cross-case comparison and convergent evidence from multiple sources. Limitations include the small interview sample, possible selection bias, contextual specificity across countries and communities and temporal variability in observed activity (season, weekday/time of day and community life cycle).

Case studies. To better contextualise the study and, more importantly, the analysis conducted, we now present a description of the four selected cases. The access areas are shown in grey in Figure 1.

The LiSA project is located in Vienna (Austria) and consists of 44 apartments and communal spaces. It was promoted by the Baugruppe LiSA cooperative in 2015, and the design was carried out by WUP Architektur (Lisa.co.at, 2023).

The second project analysed is called Soubeyran and is located in Geneva (Switzerland), comprising 38 residential units, offices and commercial spaces. It was promoted by Equilibre Une Coopérative d'Habitation in 2016 and designed by Atba Architects (Equilibre, 2023).

The Las Carolinas project in Madrid (Spain) consists of 17 residential units. It was promoted by the cooperative Entrepatrios (Iglesias-Varela and Sanchez-Moya, 2022) in 2018 and designed by Satt Arquitectura (Entrepatrios, 2023).

Table 2. Evidence map linking cross-case patterns to data sources and design implications

Cross-case pattern/proposition	Spatial attribute(s)	Evidence base (case codes + data sources)	Resident account (where available)	Design implication
Generous access areas enable staying as well as moving, supporting low-threshold encounters	Width/area beyond minimum circulation; niches; places to pause	BCN.BO, VIE.LI, GVA.ES, MAD.EP: plans + <i>in situ</i> observation; BCN.BO resident quote (1,3)	BCN.BO: encounters and “being there” (Resident, BCN.BO)	Provide generous width and micro-niches; design “pause points” without obstructing circulation
Non-linear and multi-directional routes increase opportunities for unplanned encounters	Multiple pathways; junctions; alternative routes to shared destinations	All cases: plans + observation; supported by cross-case synthesis; (optional) link to circulation literature in Discussion	–	Avoid single rigid corridor logic where possible; create legible, shared routes that bring residents into co-presence
Adjacency and direct connection to communal programmes strengthens interaction and participation	Proximity/visibility to kitchen/dining, multifunction rooms, garden; entrances linked to shared spaces	VIE.LI, GVA.ES, MAD.EP, BCN.BO: plans + observation; VIE.LI quote; GVA.ES account (apples)	VIE.LI: direct street connection supports events/kids (Resident, VIE.LI)	Locate key communal programmes on/near shared paths; connect them visually and physically to access areas
Permeable enclosures and daylight support visual connection and perceived continuity (and comfort)	Transparent/movable partitions; glazed boundaries; sliding doors; daylight penetration	All cases: plans + observation; MAD.EP resident account (covered-yet-open)	MAD.EP: covered-yet-open supports a variety of activities (Resident account, MAD.EP)	Use transparent or movable partitions where appropriate; prioritise daylight and sightlines to support mutual awareness
Affordances for lingering (furniture/vegetation) legitimise staying and create a shared ambience	Fixed/movable seating; planters; greenery; “threshold furniture”	BCN.BO, MAD.EP, VIE.LI, GVA.ES: observation; BCN.BO quote (2)	BCN.BO: seasonal clothing swap on the bench (Resident, BCN.BO)	Provide robust, maintainable seating and planting opportunities; support informal exchange without blocking circulation
Everyday appropriation (objects, noticeboards, micro-exchange points) evidences a shared social infrastructure	Mailboxes with exchange gaps; noticeboards; storage niches; tolerated objects	GVA.ES: resident accounts (mailbox gaps; apples) + observation; all cases: observation of objects/noticeboards	GVA.ES: mailboxes support low-effort exchange; apples shared from garden (Resident account, GVA.ES)	Design “lightweight” exchange/communication infrastructure: noticeboards, mail areas, small shelves; clarify governance to avoid conflict

La Borda in Barcelona (Spain) consists of 28 residential units and was promoted by the cooperative La Borda (Cabré and Arnaú, 2018) in 2018, designed by Lacol Arquitectura Cooperativa (La Borda, 2023).

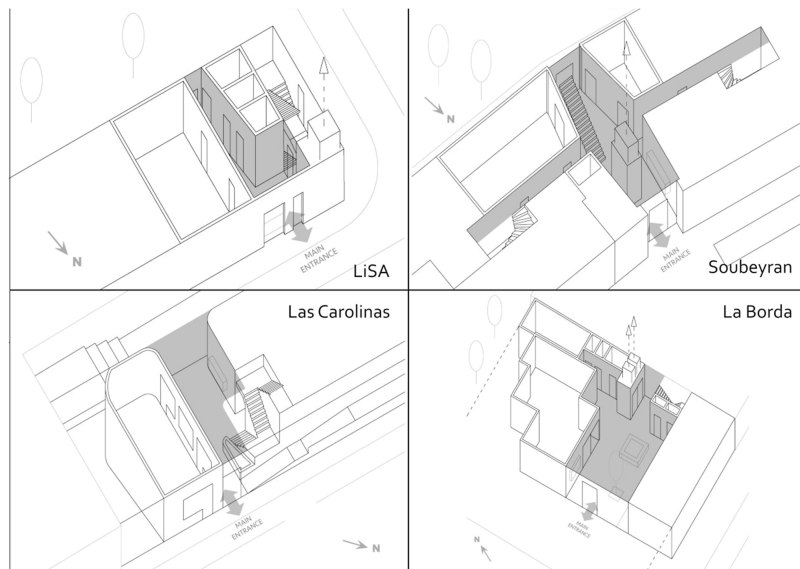


Figure 1. Overview of access area configurations in LiSA, Soubeyran, Las Carolinas and La Borda (drawings by authors). Source: Compiled by the authors, 2023

Results

To foreground residents' perspectives and strengthen the evidential chain, the cross-case synthesis interprets findings as relationships between (1) access-area spatial attributes and (2) reported and observed patterns of everyday encounters. Across the cases, encounters were more likely when access areas supported mutual awareness without forcing interaction – through clear sightlines, moderate transparency and small opportunities to pause – and when they offered legitimate reasons to linger, such as seating, planting, shared objects, mailboxes or micro-niches. Conversely, long narrow corridors with limited daylight and few affordances were more often experienced as purely transitory, reducing the likelihood of spontaneous conversation. Residents also emphasised boundary conditions: architectural form interacts with governance and social norms, so the same feature may feel welcoming in one community and intrusive in another, depending on expectations about privacy and sociability.

In what follows, using the evidence chain summarised in [Table 2](#), each case is presented through a consistent set of descriptors (geometry and thresholds, visibility and enclosure, adjacency to communal destinations and material affordances such as furniture, vegetation and resident-added objects). Particular attention is paid to how these elements shape ambience and residents' perception of access areas ([Malik and Osmolova, 2022](#)), combining plan-based reading with *in situ* observation of use.

Analysis of the spatial characteristics

In LiSA, the access area, shown diagrammatically in [Figure 2](#), connects the street with the rear garden. Additionally, it includes a restroom, a communal laundry, a small kitchen and adjacent to this, a multifunctional space.

From this access area, one enters the vertical communication corridor, which consists of a lift and a staircase. The laundry and the multifunctional space generate a high level of foot traffic. The doors have glazed sections that allow visibility of the people in these spaces, as well as the activities taking place.

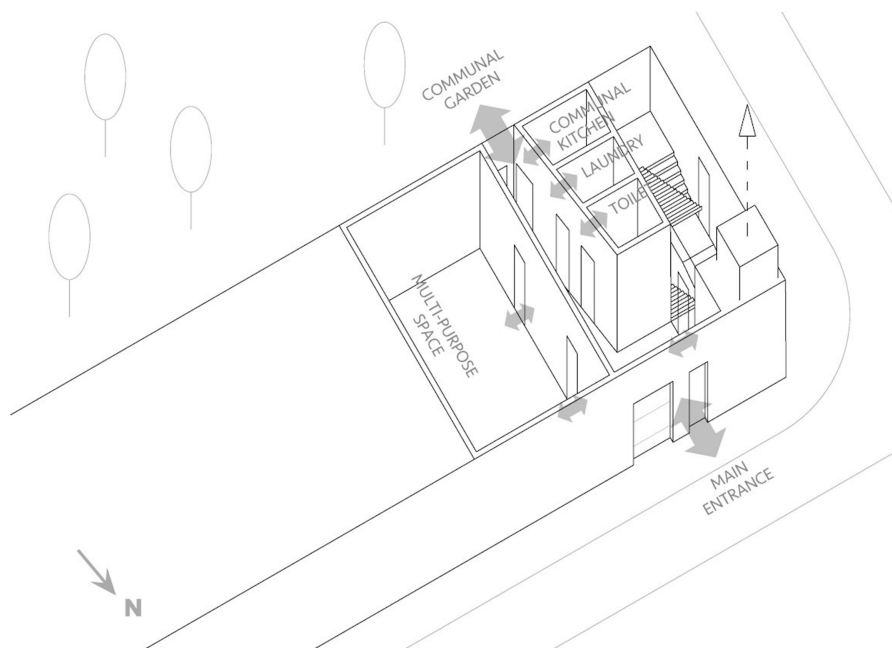


Figure 2. Diagram of connections and adjacent spaces in LiSA. Source: Compiled by the authors, 2023

In the area closest to the street, the space is wider, with enough room for mailboxes, a bench, a bulletin board for announcements and a football table.

In Soubeyran, the first access area, shown in [Figure 3](#), houses the central lift. At the end of the hallway is the staircase. On both sides of this, there are two communal spaces: on the right, there is a multifunctional room with a library and musical instruments, and on the left are the community kitchen and dining room, both of which are also used for meetings and celebrations. At the far end, there is a passage leading to the gallery and the community garden.

Crossing the area towards the access, we reach the gallery and community garden. Both accesses are visible through fully glazed floor-to-ceiling walls, ensuring a visual connection between the exterior and the interior spaces. In the central part of the space are the lift and the start of the staircase leading to the upper floors. There are also connections on both sides with hallways that provide access to communal areas and offices. The communal spaces on both sides also open with large sliding doors.

At the entrance, there is space on the walls to hang posters and notices. There are also mailboxes that protrude from the wall, leaving some space between them, allowing for the placement of other items such as plants.

In Las Carolinas, the access configuration shown in [Figure 4](#) includes a community space that is connected by several access points. It also has direct access from the street, allowing for activities to be open to the neighbourhood, but without accessing the private community areas. Finally, the access area opens up to the backyard garden or courtyard.

From the access, the rear courtyard can be reached. The community space on the left side is connected by two access points and windows, while on the opposite side, there are stairs and a ramp leading to the upper floors, as well as stairs descending to the basement parking. The space is closed off from the street by a metal gate, allowing for the passage of air while also maintaining direct visual connection.

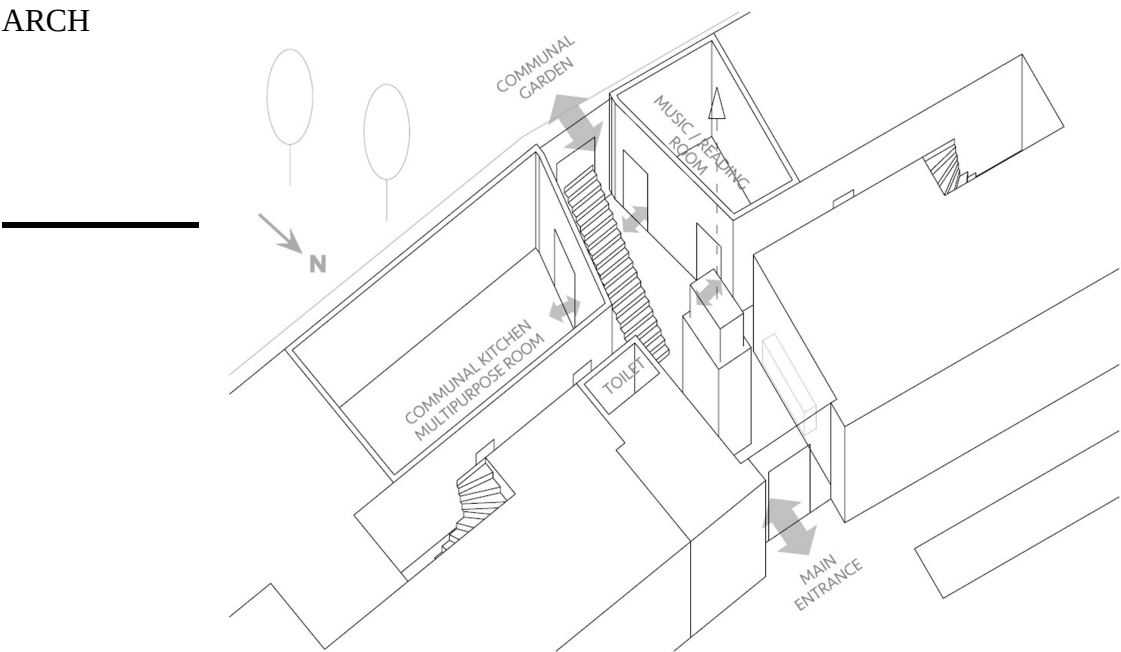


Figure 3. Diagram of connections and adjacent spaces in Soubeyran. Source: Compiled by the authors, 2023

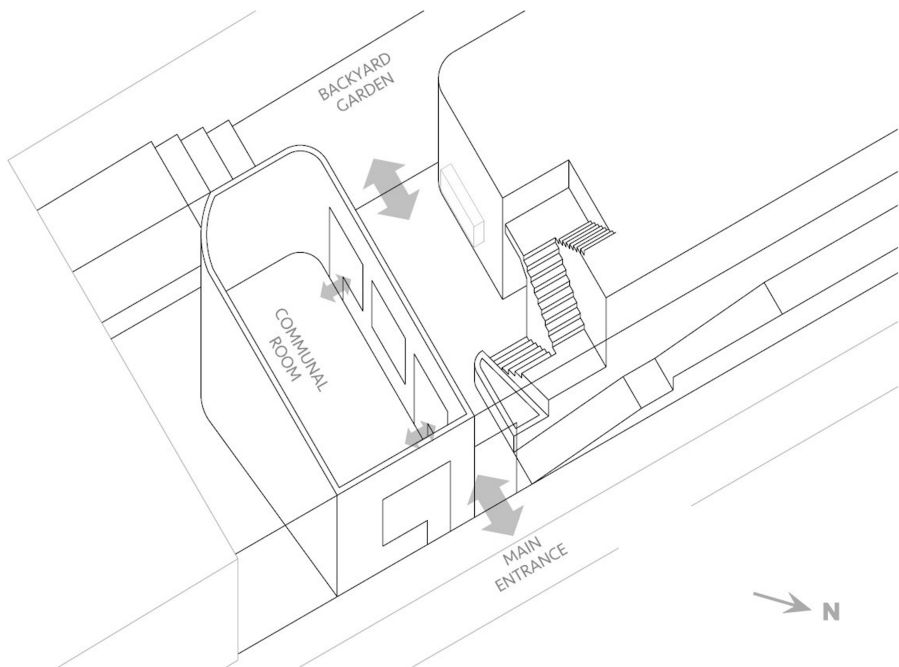


Figure 4. Diagram of connections and adjacent spaces in Las Carolinas. Source: Compiled by the authors, 2023

At the base of the staircase and ramp is a large planter containing vegetation. Further along are the mailboxes, which also protrude from the wall, serving as shelves for other objects.

At La Borda, the access area shown in Figure 5 is a large interior courtyard. On the left side of the courtyard is a communal space visible through a fully glazed wall. There is a shared kitchen with space for dining, meeting and holding celebrations. Activities such as yoga also take place there. Some of the kitchen furniture is movable, allowing the space to be used in different ways. At the far end of the courtyard, there is access to the upper floors of the building.

Access to the courtyard is through a passage that connects the street to a public park. Access is through a metal mesh, allowing a visual connection between the passage and the courtyard. The communal space opens up on the left side and is visible through a glass wall, establishing a direct visual relationship. At the far end, there is access to the stairwell and lift.

In the central part of the courtyard, there is a planter with vegetation and a square bench with another planter inside it. Two other spaces in the ground are planted with climbing plants, which have grown to frame the entrance to a communal space. This creates a strong presence of greenery in the courtyard. On one side, there is a wall for notices and posters, and mailboxes which also serve as shelves for other objects. In this case, the right wall of the courtyard also serves as space for bike storage, using a vertical storage system.

Analysis of use

This section focuses on the observed practices documented during the fieldwork period (December 2022 to June 2023), with a view to understanding movement patterns and interactions among residents.

In LiSA, the wider space near the street, visible in Plate 1, is particularly popular. This area features a football table, chairs, a bench, plants and notice boards for posters and

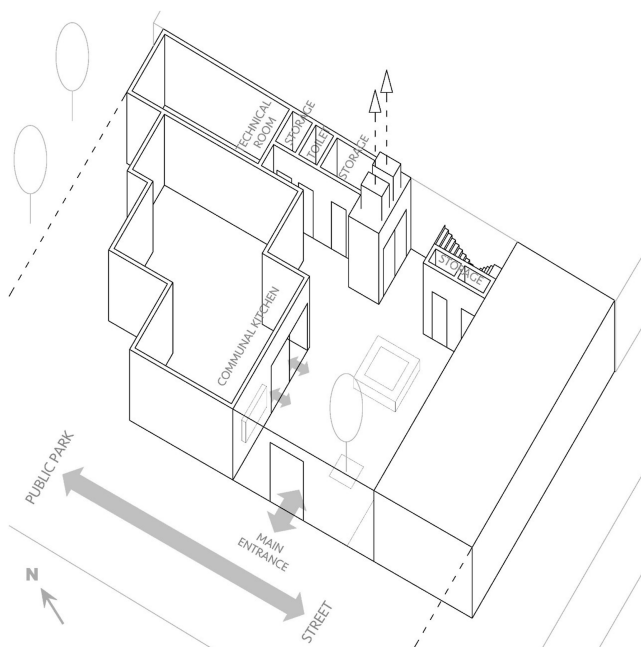


Figure 5. Diagram of connections and adjacent spaces in La Borda. Source: Compiled by the authors, 2023



Plate 1. Access area in LiSA showing the widened entrance zone and its connection to shared spaces. Source: Original photograph by the authors, 2023

announcements. Residents often use this space while waiting for their laundry, making it a place to pause, socialise and meet neighbours.

“So better access is directly from the street and it’s also good for parents and kids when we have events, parties, where the kids are outside, but that is a direct connection.” (Resident, VIE.LI)

In Soubeyran, the wall opposite the mailboxes, shown in [Plate 2](#), is covered with posters and notices, providing information for residents. As seen in the photograph below, there is even an improvised space for lost and found items. The presence of potted plants indicates that these are being maintained by the residents. Among the mailboxes, there are also small pots and other objects placed for communal use.



Plate 2. Entrance wall in Soubeyran showing shared surfaces that support small acts of exchange. Source: Original photograph by the authors, 2023

According to resident accounts, the mailbox layout in GVA.ES leaves small gaps that enable low-effort exchange (e.g. leaving something for a neighbour or returning a borrowed item), supporting everyday reciprocity in the access area (Resident account, GVA.ES)

Likewise, in the stairwell area, there is a folded ping-pong table and other play items. When the sliding doors of the music-library room and the communal dining area are opened, the space can be used in multiple ways.

Residents also reported that boxes under the stair landing are used to share apples collected from the community garden connected to this space, illustrating an unprogrammed practice of distribution and sharing (Resident account, GVA.ES)

In Las Carolinas, the entrance shown in [Plate 3](#) has wooden benches, a folded ping-pong table, children's scooters and other toys. Thus, in addition to serving as a passageway, it accommodates various activities and games, closely linked to the adjacent communal space. Decorative elements are also suspended from the ceiling. This access area is further connected to the rear courtyard, where play continues.

In MAD.EP, resident accounts emphasised that the access area supports a variety of activities because it is open yet covered, allowing people to stay and use the space in different weather conditions rather than only passing through (Resident account, MAD.EP)

Finally, the access area of La Borda, shown in [Plate 4](#), serves as a focal point for the entire community. The upper floors are organised around the void above this courtyard. A communal space with a glass-fronted entrance opens fully onto the courtyard, while another shared space with a laundry area is located on the first floor. The presence of vegetation is evident both at the centre and along the sides of the courtyard.

"It's largely a place of passage, but it's also pleasant: when you cross paths you often exchange a few words - how did it go? I see you're limping - sometimes it's just body language, a quick check-in." (Resident, BCN.BO)

"At some moments you can see people simply being there - often because of the children - so the entrance turns into a place where someone stays rather than just passes through." (Resident, BCN.BO)

The wall-mounted unit with mailboxes and an adjacent notice board provides space for displaying posters and announcements. Additionally, the space allows younger residents to park their scooters and leave their helmets there. On the right-hand wall, bicycles can be stored vertically.



Plate 3. Covered access area in Las Carolinas supporting lingering and everyday community routines. Source: Original photograph by the authors, 2023



Plate 4. Access patio in La Borda with mailboxes and panels supporting informal encounters and children's play. Source: Original photograph by the authors, 2023

Residents also described how fixed elements, such as the wooden bench, can support informal exchange practices at certain times of the year.

"The entrance becomes a kind of seasonal swap: people leave clothes for the summer-winter change on the wooden bench, and others come by and take what they need – almost like a little market at certain times of the year." (Resident, BCN.BO)

[Table 2](#) summarises the evidence chain behind the cross-case patterns and design propositions.

Discussion

Evidence-supported cross-case patterns

The findings support the view that community-building in cohousing is not produced by a single "communal room" alone, but by a sequence of intermediate spaces that repeatedly bring residents into low-stakes co-presence. Access areas can function as a "social buffer" between private homes and collective life when they offer graded thresholds and allow residents to regulate exposure – seeing and being seen without feeling forced to perform sociability. In this sense, the cross-case comparison helps identify the spatial patterns through which access areas contribute to everyday interaction while maintaining privacy.

A first pattern concerns the uses adjacent to access areas. In line with [Williams \(2005\)](#), spaces designed for key activities in cohousing are most effective for social interaction when they are connected to passageways shared by many residents and remain visually and physically accessible from everyday routes. Similarly, [Torres-Antonini \(2001\)](#) highlights the role of facility location and circulation patterns for propitious social interaction and a sense of unity. Across the cases, communal kitchen and dining spaces are directly linked to the access area in three projects, functioning as an "introduction" to the community and a clear statement of intent. In LiSA, rather than a large communal kitchen/dining, a smaller kitchen also operates as a meeting place centred on food.

Differences emerge in the number and variety of adjacent communal programmes. The Swiss and Austrian examples include additional adjacent uses beyond kitchen/dining (e.g. laundry in LiSA; a multifunctional music and library room in Soubeyran). Consistent with [Abu-Ghazze \(1999\)](#), a greater concentration of residents near shared-activity spaces,

combined with shared pathways, increases the probability of passive contacts and social interaction. Moreover, all four examples present adjacent spaces with direct visual connections through fully glazed walls. Beyond supporting safety and the perception of safety (Cedeño-Pérez, 2009), such visibility can act as an invitation to participate in ongoing activities and strengthen the sense of community (Lee *et al.*, 2022).

A second pattern relates to movement options and transitions. In all four cases, residents can move in multiple directions, supporting unplanned encounters along pathways (Abu-Ghazze, 1999). Torres-Antonini (2001) suggests that encounters are maximised when there is no alternative route to the central communal space; at the same time, Williams (2005) notes that shared pathways to activity sites increase the potential for interaction. The Swiss case introduces a specific condition: a junction connects the entrance to both housing units and offices, absent in the other projects. This creates interactions between residents and non-residents and may broaden openness to outsiders – an outcome that also aligns with the idea that transitions between spaces of different use can guide and provoke interaction (Torres-Antonini, 2001).

A third pattern concerns the capacity of access areas to host more than circulation. Across the cases, access areas functioned as socio-spatial infrastructure when they included slack space – room beyond “tight-fit” circulation – that legitimised stopping, waiting, exchanging items or supervising children (Schneider and Till, 2005; Till, 2009).

This interpretation is consistent with Chinchilla’s (2020) “multidimensional reality”, which invites a shift from viewing thresholds as leftover circulation to recognising their capacity to host layered everyday practices and care-related interaction.

The comparison also suggests that the number and configuration of entrances influence the intensity and character of use. The Austrian and Swiss examples have multiple building entrances, while the Spanish examples are accessed exclusively through the areas analysed. This may help explain why the Spanish cases show more intensive appropriation, with more objects, posters and tools left in access areas. The greater presence of greenery in the Spanish examples (built-in planters plus resident-added plants) further supports this reading. As Beck (2020) argues, self-management and co-creation activities can strengthen connections between people and their environment, facilitating collective improvements and shared care practices.

Finally, all four cases feature notice areas that facilitate communication. As Jarvis (2011) notes, notice boards can celebrate events and circulate information in ways that reinforce shared identity. In the analysed projects, mailboxes, panels and posters act as low-tech communication infrastructure for everyday coordination (Torres-Antonini, 2001).

Design propositions and boundary conditions

At the same time, the cases underline boundary conditions: governance arrangements (rules for leaving objects, cleaning routines, use of shared terraces), resident composition and cultural expectations about privacy can amplify or dampen the social effects of spatial design. Therefore, design propositions should be interpreted as part of a socio-spatial system rather than architectural determinism. For architectural practice and research, the practical implication is that small, inexpensive design moves in access areas – daylight, width where possible, micro-niches, seating, planting and clear but gentle thresholds – can support the everyday infrastructure of community when aligned with residents’ norms.

Conclusions

This study examined collective access areas in four European cohousing projects as socio-spatial infrastructures that mediate between private dwellings and shared community life. Rather than functioning only as circulation, these spaces can host layered everyday practices – micro-encounters, exchange, communication and care-related routines – when their spatial configuration and material affordances legitimise both movement and staying.

Across the four cases, six recurring design attributes were associated with more frequent everyday encounters and richer patterns of use:

Slack space (generous dimensions). Access areas that exceed minimum code requirements allow flexible and evolving uses over time. Such spatial “slack” provides redundancy that can accommodate unprogrammed practices (Schneider and Till, 2005; Till, 2009).

Multiple pathways and non-linear movement. When circulation is not reduced to a single rigid route, residents can take different paths and trajectories, increasing the likelihood of unplanned encounters and everyday coordination (Williams, 2005).

Direct connections to communal programmes and/or the urban environment. Access areas that connect visibly and spatially to key shared facilities (e.g. kitchen/dining, laundry, multifunctional rooms) and open towards the street support both internal interaction and a degree of neighbourhood interface.

Permeable and transparent enclosures. Glazed or movable boundaries (including large sliding doors in some cases) strengthen visual connection, daylight and perceived continuity between access areas and adjacent spaces, reducing compartmentalisation and encouraging incidental participation.

Affordances for lingering: furniture and vegetation. Seating and greenery support staying, exchanging items and informal communication while contributing to atmosphere (Malik and Osmolova, 2022).

Traces of appropriation and communication infrastructures. Resident-added objects (helmets, scooters, toys and clothing) indicate tolerated shared occupation without visible conflict, and noticeboards/panels support information exchange, organisation and a sense of shared life.

Based on these patterns, the design propositions that emerge are pragmatic and low-threshold: connect key communal spaces to access areas through transparent or movable partitions; design routes that allow multiple directions and increase shared passage to activity sites; reinforce visual connections (including across levels where relevant) to support mutual awareness and perceived safety; and, where space permits, provide niches or areas for seating and planting supported by good natural light. These moves do not “create community” on their own, but they can meaningfully support the everyday infrastructure through which community is sustained (Beck, 2020).

Limitations and future research. The study is limited by four cases and one interview per case; outcomes are therefore best read as evidence-informed propositions. Observations provide time-specific snapshots, and interviewees may over-represent more engaged residents. Future research should expand participants and contexts and complement qualitative accounts with light post-occupancy tools (e.g. short resident survey on perceived community and encounter frequency).

Data availability statement

Interview notes and observational records contain information that could compromise participant confidentiality and are therefore not publicly available. De-identified excerpts may be provided by the authors on reasonable request.

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